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**'If I go in like a cranky sea-lion, I come out like a smiling dolphin':
marathon swimming and the unexpected pleasures of being a body in
water.**

It is midnight, and after a three hour crossing into rolling five foot swells, our boat, the Outrider, has moored in a dark cove on Santa Catalina Island while we make the final preparations for my swim - a 21 mile crossing to the mainland, landing just south of Los Angeles. I am standing on the edge of the boat, my body slick with suncream and with globs of Vaseline smeared in my armpits and around my costume straps. Seasick from the boat ride over, the mingled odours of marathon swimming – boat diesel, sea salt, cream and grease – trigger another wave of nausea and disorientation. I look down at the inky black water, and suddenly, something on the peripheries of my goggle-restricted vision breaks the surface and slaps quickly back into the water again. The nausea retreats, superseded by a fear-filled rush of adrenalin; my heart pounds, my seasick stomach knots coldly, and the back of my hands, head and neck prick sharply, like the skin is lifting up from the muscle and bone. Even though I accept the crew's reassurances that it was only a flying fish drawn in by the boat's lights, all I can think about – irrationally, disproportionately – is sharks, and I am more viscerally frightened than I can ever remember being before a swim. The crew is waiting for me to jump in, and I feel momentarily trapped and full of despair; another wave of nausea from the rocking of the boat, and a fresh prickling of fear. I know that I have to go; that for me, being *in* is always better than being *on* the water. I count to three under my breath and jump, away from the boat, then dropping vertically downwards with my arms pressed to my sides, allowing the momentum of the drop to drive me well below the dark surface. And then, there is a moment of familiar, restorative calm; the water stops my descent and I hang still for a few brief seconds, held by the dark, warm sea, and hearing and feeling the bubbles from my trickling exhalation roll up my

face to the surface. My heart is no longer pounding in my ears, or my skin crawling with fear. It is thickly quiet after the busy noise of the boat, and the flashing green safety light clipped on to my goggle straps casts a ghostly intermittent glow from behind me. Feeling the buoyancy of the salty water start to push me towards the surface, I reach up with both arms, tilt my hands to feel for the water, and then drive them downwards, propelling myself upwards with a stabilizing fluttery kick to break the surface and take a deep breath. It all took just a matter of seconds, but finally, I'm ready to start the swim.

* * * * *

Sensational swimming

Marathon swimming is by any measure a minority sport. Taking the most iconic marathon swim – the English Channel – as an example, since the first successful crossing by Matthew Webb in 1875, 1245 people have completed a total of 1691 solo crossings; 35% of these were by womenⁱ. The average crossing time for the swim – 21 miles at its narrowest point – is over 13 hours and traditional 'Channel rules' dictate that, in a nostalgic nod to Webb's original swim conditions, swimmers can only wear a regular swimming costume, cap and goggles and are forbidden to touch the escort boat or any other person throughout the swim. Unlike many other nature-based, extreme and lifestyle sports such as windsurfing (Humberstone, 2011), surfing (Evers, 2009), snowboarding (Thorpe, 2011) or sports climbing (Lewis, 2004), therefore, marathon swimming identifies strongly with long-standing traditions and practices, with limited room for innovation in terms of the basic practices of the sport (Wheaton, 2004a: 11-12). Furthermore, it lacks the spectacle, adrenalin rush and risk of acute injury of many extreme and lifestyle sports (Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003; Wheaton, 2004b; Thorpe, 2011); instead, its extremity lies in the scale, duration and conditions of the challenge.

But perhaps the most striking difference between marathon swimming and other nature-based lifestyle sports lies in the imagination of its pleasures. While

one of the defining characteristics of lifestyle sports (as displayed in media representations, for example) is a commitment to hedonistic fun and living for the moment (Wheaton, 2004: 11-12a), marathon swimming is much more likely to be represented publically through narratives of suffering and the deferral of pleasure – for example, until the triumphant completion of a swim. This can be seen in charity fund-raising pages set up by marathon swimmers, which explicitly trade the willingness to suffer in exchange for sponsorship. I replicated this dominant representation in a funding application for a project to study the process of becoming a marathon swimmer, opening the proposal with the claim that swimming requires ‘psychological strategies for coping with the sensory deprivations and physical discomforts of marathon swimming’. This rhetorical flourish was no doubt intended to grab the attention of the assessment panel, but two years on, I cringe at my rather dramatic focus on the negative aspects of marathon swimming, as well as my casual separation of mind and body in the proposal.

There is no question that marathon swimming involves some elements of discomfort; cold, dark, sleep-deprivation, isolation, fear, sickness, exhaustion and pain are all fairly unavoidable aspects of the process. Pleasure, on the other hand, is more difficult to imagine, except for the spectacular moment of overcoming; of completing a crossing. Marathon swimming, then, is conventionally understood through the rhetorics of mastery; stretches of water are ‘conquered’ or ‘defeated’, and bodies (and nature) are overcome by disciplined minds in order to complete a successful crossing. Within the swimming community, this is normalized through the aphoristic wisdom that swimming is ‘80% mental and 20% physical’.

This paper argues, *contra* this dominant representation, that marathon swimming is not simply a telic practice oriented towards the goal of a completed swim, but is also autotelic; that is, for many swimmers, being a swimming body in open water can become an end in itself, rather than (or as well as) a means to an end. These are the *unexpected* pleasures of marathon swimming; the autotelic pleasures that swimmers discover and eventually seek out beyond (or alongside)

the domain of challenge and overcoming. In short, it is as necessary to be able to account for the feeling of 'at-homeness' I felt at the start of my Catalina Channel swim as it is for the sickness and the fear. Specifically, I argue that rather than constituting the simple exercise of mind over matter, the process of becoming a marathon swimming changes the way that the body *feels*.

This 'shifted sensorium' (Potter, 2008: 459) opens up new possibilities for experiencing the body, and the world, outside of dualistic habits of thought, providing a platform for thinking differently about embodiment, and 'analyzing the social ideologies conveyed through sensory values and practices' (Howes, 2005: 4). The sensory, then, is always socially situated, and access to both the expected and unexpected pleasures of marathon swimming is marked by gender (and class and race) in ways that are easily overlooked in an activity that is ostensibly open to everyone. Consequently, while many of the female swimmers in this study, including myself, experienced the marathon swimming body in novel, pleasurable and self-empowering ways, these experiences remained 'framed by the parameters of material and structural influences and constraints' (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998: 270). As such, and following Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) argument for a feminist ethnography that is able to seek out commonalities *and* differences, this paper explores not only the unexpected pleasures of marathon swimming, but also, how intersecting axes of social difference both constrain and facilitate access to those embodied pleasures.

The following sections sets out the methodology for the research upon which this paper is based. The next section explores the limitations of the mind-body split as a way of conceptualizing gendered sporting embodiment, and makes the case for a sensory approach as a means of opening up alternative ways of think about the body. This is exemplified in the next section, which demonstrates how the swimming body *feels* differently as a result of the training process. The final section focuses on experiences of sensory pleasures in swimming and highlights the ways in which they are inextricable from the social values and material realities of gendered embodiment.

Immersion

The research project on which this paper draws is an exercise in immersion – both in the water, and in the culture, values and practices that make up the marathon swimming sporting subculture. In the genesis of the project, the swimming came first, and I brought a long, although unremarkable, competitive and leisure swimming history with me to my English Channel endeavour. However, as a fledging *marathon* swimmer, I still had a great deal to learn and much bodily work to do when in October 2008, I put down a deposit with a boat pilot for an August 2010 English Channel swim. The project upon which this paper is based – *Becoming a Channel Swimmer* (BACS)ⁱⁱ – grew out of that first winter of gradually intensifying training, as I began to reflect upon the process of ‘becoming’ (or trying to become) that I was engaged in.

BACS is an (auto)ethnography; the parenthetical separation signals my intention to produce *both* a situated, reflexive account of becoming a marathon swimmer, including the social and cultural context within that process of becoming takes place, *and* an autobiographical, embodied account of that process (Reed-Danahay, 1997). While these two elements of the project are clearly interrelated, I wanted to retain the possibility of separation because hard training brings with it the possibility of swim-stopping injury that could have precluded the documentation of my own embodied experiences of ‘becoming’ within the funded life of the project (although this might also have opened up a rich rehabilitation narrative (Sparkes, 1996; Hockey, 2005)). Fortunately, I remained largely uninjured throughout, and using what Wacquant describes as ‘observant participation’ (2004: 6), I was able to fully exploit my own bodily engagement in the process from within the marathon swimming subculture. This active insider status was essential to the process of gaining access to the marathon swimming community (Wheaton, 1995), as well as offering an understanding of the lived corporeality of the sport that is inaccessible through non-involvement (Sparkes 2009).

As with many other extreme and lifestyle sports, the marathon swimming community is comprised predominantly of white, middle class professionals

(Abbas, 2004; Wheaton, 2004a; Hanold, 2010; Thorpe, 2011). For example, of the 45 interviewees in this study – an opportunistic sample of 19 women and 26 men – only two were non-white, and the majority had either an undergraduate degree or an equivalent professional training. Four interviewees were retired and one was waiting to start a new job; the rest were employed in a range of professional fields including healthcare, the fitness industry, management, finance, advertising, teaching, IT, engineering, the emergency services and the creative industries. This demographic reflects the fact that even though marathon swimming, unlike windsurfing (Wheaton, 2003) for example, requires little initial capital investment (costume, cap, goggles), it is an expensive sport, with escort boat hire alone costing over £2000 for an English Channel swim. Furthermore, the transnational nature of the sport demands both the comfort with and expectation of extensive travel that marks middle-classness (Abbas, 2004; Thorpe, 2011: 201). As a white, middle class university lecturer, I fit easily into this dominant profile, with the additional privilege of a research grant which gave me both the time and money for a transnational engagement with the swimming world over a relatively condensed time period, including fieldwork at training sites in the UK, the Channel Islands, Malta, Ireland and southern California. This was practically beyond the means of many, especially in economically difficult times, attracting wry comments from both work and swimming colleagues alike about my ‘tough’ working life as what the Guardian described as an ‘aquatic sociologist’ (Arnot, 2010). The data from these travels, and the analysis of that data, provide the basis for the remainder of this paper, beginning with a discussion of the limitations of the mind-body split in accounting for embodied experience and positing a sensorial alternative.

From mind-body to the ‘shifted sensorium’

As displayed in my own careless slippage in the grant application described in the introduction, the rhetorics of a mind-body split have a learned ‘common sense’ quality in accounting for suffering, struggle and overcoming. However, as this section explores, reliance on a conceptual split between mind and body is not only politically problematic from a feminist perspective, but also enables only a partial account of embodied experience. Elizabeth Spelman argues that

there are many reasons for feminists to be wary of the mind-body distinction. Women's lives are conventionally relegated to the uncelebrated domain of the body and its 'lower functions', and are presumed to be lacking in reason and psychological and emotional fortitude – a conviction that is inextricably bound up with the depreciation and degradation of women (as well as other oppressed groups) (2010: 30; see also, Grosz, 1994). According to Iris Marion Young, this underpins the identity of women as Other, and as body-object as opposed to the male body-subject (Young, 2010: 13). This has particular salience in the context of sport which, Young argues, 'exhibits the essential body-subject', calling upon 'the body's capacities and skills merely for the sake of determining what they can achieve' (p. 14). Consequently, she argues that if women are Other, then sport and women are necessarily mutually exclusive (see also, Scott and Derry, 2005).

Sport, therefore, remains one area where gender boundaries are carefully drawn and policed (Shogan, 1999; Wachs, 2005; Woodward, 2009). The firm conviction that women's bodies have different, and lesser, abilities compared to men underpins this adherence to gender binaries (Wachs, 2005:527), holding in place the (white) male body as the archetypal sporting body, and as the standard against which other sporting performances can be measured. In the context of marathon swimming, for example, this is evidenced in the repeated reassurances that 'girls' (as women are habitually referred to throughout the sporting domain (Wachs, 2006)) can be just as good as men (Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008). Swim-threatening weakness, however, is always associated with the feminine - 'crying like a girl'; 'don't be such a woman' – while doing better is aligned with becoming more masculine: 'man up'; 'grow a pair'.

As has also been observed in subcultures of windsurfing (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998) and distance running (Smith, 2000), within the marathon swimming community, I have witnessed very little of the overt gender segregation (beyond record keeping) or directly sexist behaviour towards women that characterizes more traditional sports. Furthermore, as with ultra-marathon running (Hanold, 2010), it is not uncommon for women to hold marathon swimming records, or out-perform men in competitive events.

However, female high performance still has to be accounted for, and this is achieved primarily through discourses of biological advantage, rooting women firmly back in the domain of the body. For example, women are commonly described as advantaged by higher levels of body fat, providing both buoyancy and insulation against the cold. Women's presumed higher tolerance for pain – a 'natural' asset related to the demands of childbirth – is also a commonly posited explanation. During a training session with my local Masters club, I completed a kick set ahead of a male swimmer in the next lane; 'women', he explained to me in response, 'have much more flexible ankles than men'. Whether these claims of biological advantage are 'true' is less significant here than *when* they are mobilized – i.e. as explanations of female high performance. In discursive terms, then, biological reductionism functions 'as an implicit defense of patriarchy' (Ford and Brown, 2006: 90). This resort to the biological can also be seen in explanations of the paucity of non-white marathon swimmers – an evidently social phenomenon based in lack of opportunity and presumed sporting 'fit' but which is commonly attributed to a 'natural' lack of buoyancy due to low body fat and high bone density (Allen and Nickel, 1969). Writing of black basketball players, Shogan argues that they are caught in a 'double bind'; that 'white athletes are successful in sport because of their intelligence and hard work and black athletes succeed because of their natural athleticism' (Shogan, 1999: 66). A similar case can be made about female swimmers, whose accomplishments are more likely to be attributed to biological stereotypes than to the socially privileged traits of hard work or skill. A hierarchically gendered (and raced) mind-body split, then, remains in place in accounting for marathon swimming.

Following Spelman, this is not to argue that the mind-body dualism is inherently or intentionally sexist or oppressive (Spelman, 2010: 36). Indeed, my own casual use of it in the application (and elsewhere in my fieldnotes) illustrates the ways in which dualistic thinking is a culturally ingrained way of understanding and making sense of embodiment. It has a 'psychic legacy [that] lives on in the implicit assumptions carried out in the rituals and practices of everyday life' (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 5). Especially in the domain of sport, it has a 'kernel of truth' (Leder, 1990: 107) in the body's own tendency to recede from

awareness at times of wellness, or the learned capacity of the athlete or dancer to make pain and discomfort 'actively absent' (Aalten, 2007). But nevertheless, the dualistic story 'often ends up being a highly politicized one' (Spelman, 2010: 36) that sets the stage for problematic social and political relations, including those of gender.

Returning to the transforming moment of immersion at the beginning of my Catalina swim, a dualistic model ('80% mental and 20% physical') has little effective explanatory power; while a narrative of overcoming fear and sickness could perhaps account for making myself jump in, it cannot explain the calm that followed. An alternative, phenomenological reading, however, suggests a sensory, embodied moment of positive transformation – an approach which is much more able to take seriously the sometimes unexpected and transformative pleasures of swimming, and which opens up new possibilities for thinking about the swimming body outside of normative gendered narratives.

Writing about adventure climbing, Neil Lewis cites climber Bill Murray, who recounted a post-war return to the sport after a six year absence:

At the very instance my hands and feet came on the rock six years rolled away in a flash. The rock was not strange, but familiar. At each move I was taking the right holds at the right time – but no, I did not 'take' the holds – of their own accord they *came* to me. Hand, foot, and eye – nerve and muscle – they were coordinating and my climbing was effortless. (Murray, 2051, cited in Lewis, 2000)

Like Murray's return to the rock face, I felt at home in the water; the feel of the water and bubbles on my skin, the sounds, the sensations of water movement, resistance and buoyancy. The waters off Santa Catalina Island become 'not strange, but familiar', like Murray's rock. Self-evidently the co-operative qualities of rock, or water, are not innate to those environments (even while inseparable from them). Instead, these two pleasurable moments can be understood not as the outcome of intellectualized technical mastery or overcoming, but rather, as

examples of cultivated 'corporeal knowing' (Lewis, 2000: 71), with the body as the subject rather than the object of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and via sensory modes which move beyond the 'classic five' senses (Potter 2008). This is not to write out the mind from swimming experience, but rather, to argue that 'the mind is necessarily embodied and the senses mindful' (Howes, 2005: 7). As Howes notes: 'a focus on perceptual life is not a matter of losing our minds but of coming to our senses' (ibid.).

The prevailing western sensorium is a culturally-bounded phenomenon (Geurts, 2005) that is hierarchically organized to prioritise vision and hearing (Howes, 2005: 10). It is also gendered, with women conventionally associated with the proximal 'lower senses' of touch, smell and taste (Classen, 1997: 4). The senses are understood within this framework as conduits of information, which is received by the body and then interpreted by the mind; my reference in the funding application to the sensory deprivation of swimming carelessly reproduced this same model. However, as ethnographer of modern dance, Caroline Potter, argues, 'the senses should be understood as an intermeshed web of perceptory apparatuses that direct the body's total attention to its situation in the world, rather than as a set of discreet biological pathways that respond independently to physical stimuli' (2008: 446). Specific cultures, therefore cultivate and transmit what Potter calls a 'shifted sensorium' (p. 459) that defines group members. Like the dancers Potter studied, the 'being-in-the-world' of the marathon swimmer, rather than relying upon diminished inputs from the 'classic five', is primarily kinaesthetic in mode – 'a heightened sense of constantly shifting one's body in space and time in order to achieve a desired end' (p. 449). It is kinaesthetic sensations – jumping, sinking, floating, moving, reaching, propelling – that govern the moment of immersion off Santa Catalina, and provide the comforting familiarity that I experienced (see also, Straughan, 2012). The experience of swimming, then, is only one of sensory deprivation if the primary sensations of swimming are those that are dulled by the practice. If, however, swimming is characterized primarily by *heightened* kinaesthesia, then a more positive, sensorially enhanced space opens up. As the next section argues, then, the process of becoming a swimming body involves not only the

anticipated changes in performance and body composition, but also changes the way that the body *feels*.

Becoming a swimming body

To say that training changes the body is an uncontroversial claim, and preparation for marathon swims exerts both visible and invisible physiological changes. These include, for example, obvious changes such as increased upper body muscularity, as well as less overt changes to the cardiovascular and metabolic systems, all of which are expected and easily understood as both reflecting and producing enhanced swimming performance through strength and fitness. But training is also sensorially transformative; the swimming body *feels* differently. This is evidenced, for example, in the acquisition of good swimming technique, whereby the stroke is broken down into its constitutive parts – body position, hand entry, the catch, the pull, recovery, breathing, rotation, kick – and each movement and position is embodied through multiple repetitions before being re-incorporated into the full stroke. Awkward at first, explicit bodily awareness eventually recedes as the student comes to ‘feel’ the correct movement (Downey, 2005: 49; Leder, 1990). However, the skill that has been acquired is not one of endlessly perfect repetition, but rather, incorporates the ability to constantly adjust those movements (p. 28). No single stroke, then, is ever the same, especially in the constantly shifting environment of the open water, which both develops and demands a heightened kinaesthetic sense (see also, Evers, 2009: 897). This heightened kinaesthetic sense, oriented towards the specific demands of swimming, and working in concert with incorporated technique, is a central condition for the experience of the pleasures of marathon swimming.

As with Potter’s study of modern dance as a primarily kinaesthetic practice, this enhanced kinaesthesia works ‘in parallel with multiple sensory modes’ (Potter, 2008: 444), which are also refined and reoriented through training. For example, thermoception – the ability to sense heat or cold – is central to the marathon swimming body. In my fieldnotes, I describe my first lake swim of the season in May 2009. As I dived in, I experienced a powerful drive to hyperventilate, and

then a fierce ‘ice-cream’ headache; my back and thighs felt ‘on fire’. As I completed my first lap of the lake, my hands had lost all dexterity and my fingers felt sausage-like; I couldn’t feel my lips, hands or feet, and goose bumps rose high on my skin. Setting off for a second lap, I puzzled over how to interpret these bodily sensations; training advice to novices to ‘listen to your body’ to avoid the dangers of hypothermia seemed unhelpful when I had no idea what constituted safe or dangerous in this disconcerting rush of unfamiliar sensation. But learning to be in cold water safely is not simply a question of sensory translation. Instead, over time, the training induces changes not only in the body’s thermoregulatory systems (Makinen, 2010) making it possible to stay in cold water safely for longer, but also *thermoceptive* changes that change how those experiences feel.

While for most non-swimmers or pool swimmers, water temperature is calibrated in wide temperature bands – freezing, cold, warm, hot – regular open water immersion produces a much more detailed delineation of temperatures, where a single degree makes a tangible difference to the experience of being in the water in ways which would be unintelligible to those outside of the community. This is a reflection of both corporeal transformation and corporeal knowing, and accounts for the extensive ‘temperature talk’ among swimmers. Experienced swimmers learn to assess water temperature, and therefore, what kind of swimming is possible, based on bodily responses to immersion, such as the intensity of the drive to hyperventilate, headaches, skin sensations, or the speed at which the initial responses to immersion dissipate. This recalls the embodied sense of pace that distance runners develop ‘using a spectrum of bodily indicators such as respiratory rate and leg cadence’ (Hockey, 2005: 188). As Downey notes, the senses adapt to the inputs we subject them to: ‘Experiences affect how later experiences feel, even immediate sensations’ (2005: 33). It is only by marathon swimming that you can become a marathon swimmer.

The cultivated marathon swimming body, then, is one that has been transformed – physiologically, functionally, sensorially – in ways that cannot be accounted for via a mind-body split. Instead, to appropriate Elizabeth Grosz’s metaphor of the

‘inverted three-dimensional figure of eight’ of the Möbius strip, these swimming pleasures show the ‘the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes the other’ (Grosz, 1994: xii). Furthermore, the cultivated capacity to know, interact with, and move through, the aquatic environment marks swimming out not only as a site of mind-body integration, but also as an ‘emplaced’ practice involving ‘the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’ (Howes, 2005: 7). As is explored in the following section, this sensuous interrelationship is central to the autotelic pleasures of marathon swimming.

Pleasurable swimming

One of the key pleasures that many of the swimmers described in their everyday swimming was being able to find a quiet, contemplative space where they could either consider a particular problem, or empty their heads and detach from the intrusive demands of everyday life. Immersion is an affectively transformative experience (see also, Straughan, 2012), as in the title quote for this paper from an experienced San Diego swimmer: ‘If I go in like a cranky sealion, I come out like a smiling dolphin’. There is a habitual, even compulsive, element to this restorative pleasure; one IT worker described it as his daily ‘hard reset’. The regular and embodied rhythms of swimming – as with running (Hockey, 2005) or walking (Edensor, 2000) - provide an ideal background for this contemplative pleasure (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 18), highlighting thinking as an inextricably embodied practice. As Japanese novelist, Haruki Murakami notes in his lyrical book of essays on long distance running, he does not simply run in a calming, meditative void, but rather, runs ‘in order to *acquire* a void’ (Murakami, 2008: 17).

There is also a mundane and sometimes compensatory aspect to these contemplative pleasures that signal their embeddedness within the material and social norms of gender. The experienced female swimmer who described her affective transformation from cranky sealion to smiling dolphin also described swimming as ‘like prozac’; for others, it was ‘better than therapy’, and a missed swim was like ‘missing a meal’. Especially for those women coping with

significant burdens of paid, domestic and caring work, their regular swim emerged less as a route to transformative contemplation, and more as a piece of jealously guarded 'me-time'. As one female swimmer with heavy caring responsibilities noted: 'It's a chance to be something other than their cook and nurse'. Others described it as a chance to recuperate from a loss of identity – for example, following divorce, bereavement or children leaving home. Swimming, then, is an opportunity to have a sense of identity detached from others (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998: 262), but the fact that this has to be purposefully sought speaks volumes about the gendered constraints on identity formation (and access to leisure more generally) (see also, Tulle, 2007).

Ideologies of femininity dictate that women should prioritise domestic and reproductive labour over self-directed desires and interests, making it difficult for women to privilege the personal pleasures of marathon swimming over family commitments and resources – both practically and socially (see also, Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998; Smith, 2000). The majority of women in my study either didn't have children (as in my case), or their children were older and moving towards greater independence, but for those women who did have children, time spent on swimming had to be accounted for in a way that was unnecessary for male swimmers. For example, Melissa – a single parent to a teenage boy – defended her decision to devote time and resources to marathon swimming by arguing,

I've made many sacrifices, you know. As a mum, you know, in the course of [son's] life, I have gone over and above, I believe, as a mother for him, and have put everything into him.

Male swimmers were also taking parental responsibilities into account in organizing training, or making decisions about whether to sign up for another big swim. But for women, prior reproductive labour is traded publically for the right to invest in the self, while for men, that right requires no explanation. The pleasures of being a body in water, then, do not flow unproblematically to women (Smith, 2000: 203).

A second form of autotelic pleasure described by the swimmers was that of being 'in the zone', or of 'flow': 'a state of experience where a person, totally absorbed, feels tremendous amounts of exhilaration, control and enjoyment' (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 2). Access to this cultivated merging of action and awareness (p. 15) depends on having already acquired the technical skills and sensory capacities to move coordinatedly and un-selfconsciously through a shifting aquatic environment that has been rendered familiar through training. There is nothing inevitable about flow, and it is an outcome of 'feel' rather than 'will' (Game, 2001: 8). But when it happens, the rewards are great, and for the swimmers, the experience becomes an end in itself, when swimming feels 'effortless', like 'flying' and 'running across the surface'. It is 'stretching, reaching, gliding bliss' for one male UK swimmer; to another US swimmer, it is a 'comforting euphoria'. There is a loss of consciousness, where perceptions of time change. As one swimmer noted, 'it feels like the feeds are coming every 5 minutes and time just speeds up [...] People assume that the time just drags, but the opposite is true'. Like many of the interviewees in the study, he then paused, resolving the inexpressibility of sensation (Sparkes, 2009) by appealing to shared experience: 'Well, you must get this too'.

Writing in relation to windsurfing, Humberstone argues that flow is too specific a concept in its focus on 'physiological change and sharpened awareness' (2011: 505) to express the more exhilarating moments of nature-based sport, arguing that it fails to incorporate 'the specific juncture of embodiment, senses, nature and practice-in-nature' (Humberstone, 2011: 507). In Howes' terms, then, it is not sufficiently 'emplaced' to fully capture embodied experience. Instead, Humberstone proposes grounding those experiences 'in the embodied affective of the practitioner' in order to access the 'spiritual', connective dimensions of those experiences (p. 505). Among the swimmers, this is commonly expressed through feelings of 'oneness' with the open water, as in this passionate account from San Francisco marathon swimmer, Elizabeth:

But every time you're out there, it's different, and I feel like...I know this is a little hokey, but you're very aware that the world is much bigger than you. I live in this incredibly urban city, and then you go out into the bay and it's very clear that there is a natural world right here. And that kind of world of nature is huge. I mean, you just...the water is really, really big. And it's alive. And so when you swim in a pool, it's like a puddle. Like a dead puddle. And it's good - you can get fitness out of it. But when you go out here, you're stepping into something that's very much alive...

For Elizabeth, the 'dead puddle' is a poor, utilitarian substitute that is good for fitness, but not much else; as Straughan reports in relation to diving, the water is experienced as 'the antithesis of terrestrial living' (2012: 24). Similarly, distance runner, Allen-Collinson, rejects the treadmill as 'a dire last resort', arguing instead that 'my body as part of the elemental world is a fundamental component of my running experience' (2011: 290). This elemental world seeps into my own fieldnotes and swim memories: the texture and movement of the water; biting hail stones; rolling fog; glistening sunshine; the taste of saltwater; the warm sun on my shoulders; the angry honk of a territorial goose; the underwater chink of pebbles being pulled across the sea floor. The sensory and affective pleasures of swimming, then, are 'environmentally specific, produced in concert with water and the properties of this element' (Straughan, 2012: 26)

These experiences are also socially embedded, as in this encounter from my fieldnotes, describing a euphoric moment during a training swim in the upper reaches of the Thames:

The best bit of the whole swim was once we got past the round house [...]. This was unexplored territory for all of us, and for a while, the river was getting quite narrow, turgid and reedy, and I thought we were going to run out of decent water. But then, unexpectedly, it opened back up, deepened, and we spent a lovely half hour swimming in tree-sheltered, crisp water – we saw a kayak and a couple of ducks, but that's about it. I hit a zone of elevated, powerful, co-ordinated swimming; every stroke felt perfectly

timed and placed; every breath smooth and low in the water. I had this extraordinary rush of what I can only describe as a sense of power....Like it was all mine and I could do whatever I liked there. I felt like I could swim forever, but it wasn't just that – it was more like I owned the space with my whole body. An incredible freedom.

The feelings of power and entitlement to space that I recorded in my fieldnotes are notable precisely because they are at odds with conventional female embodiment – in particular, my own large, middle-aged body which is more likely to be overlooked or problematised (as overweight, as hormonally deficient) than celebrated. Those novel feelings of whole-body engagement and belonging in a given space recall Young's proposition that 'for many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space' (Young, 2005: 333). These are enculturated ways of being in the world that are rooted not in physiology or essence, but in 'the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in society' (p. 42). The exhilaration that I recorded in my fieldnotes, then, can be understood not only as a moment of personal pleasure, valued for its own sake, but also as a politically significant – if highly individualized – sensory experience; a chance to experience gendered embodiment differently.

Other women reported similar moments not simply of sensory pleasure, but also pleasure in the defiance of gender norms. In recognition of the easy disappearance and social devaluing of the post-menopausal body (Callahan, 1993), an older swimmer noted that people weren't often impressed with women her age and she relished the opportunity to make them rethink their expectations (see also, Tulle, 2007); another commented that 'you kind of disappear as you get older [...] this is my way of not quite disappearing just yet'. Similarly, a female swimmer who identified as fat, and who recounted a long history of body dissatisfaction and restricted eating, choked back tears as she told me that after years of hating her body, she was amazed by how it felt in the water. She said she felt angry that herself and others had written off her body so

easily because of her size. Others described the transgressive pleasures of counter-normative behaviours such as getting dirty and disheveled (Hanold, 2010; Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998), or of eating unrestrainedly in public (Throsby, 2011). These moments of pleasurable defiance are highly individualistic and do not coalesce into collective resistance (Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998). But nevertheless, they highlight the extent to which sensory practices are inseparable from social ideologies, even among a relatively privileged community, in ways that are rendered opaque by universalizing rhetorics of mind over matter.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the dominant characterization of marathon swimming as '80% mental and 20% physical', and the associated focus on suffering and overcoming, reprises a mind-body distinction that cannot account easily for the pleasures of marathon swimming, and which sets up an ideal measured to a masculine standard. Furthermore, *contra* the hierarchical western 'classic five' sensorium, I have argued here that the 'shifted sensorium' of marathon swimming is dominated by kinaesthesia, although always in interaction with other senses. The swimming body, then, not only undergoes the obvious muscular, cardio-vascular and metabolic changes in the course of training, but also changes the way it *feels*. It is these changes that enable the swimmer to feel 'at home' in an environment to which it does not 'naturally' belong, although this process of becoming is always mediated by and embedded in social relations – a reality that is easily obscured in the context of a sport which is ostensibly open to everyone, but which makes demands on time and resources that constrain participation.

This is not to suggest a hierarchy of unexpected and expected pleasures; indeed, the challenge of 'getting there', with all the planning and training that involves, is deeply engaging. Rather, my goal here is to use the specific focus on the unexpected pleasures of swimming to highlight the ways in which a focus on the 'shifted sensorium' of swimming facilitates a move away from habitual and entrenched ways of thinking about embodiment. It is also important not to

overstate the sensory pleasures and transformative capacities of swimming; access to them is mediated by material and social constraints, and nor are they necessarily enduring. Indeed, while I experienced a calming 'at-homeness' when I jumped in to the waters off Santa Catalina Island, this was by no means a cure-all, and within 10 minutes of starting the swim, the lingering bodily disturbance of seasickness from the boat ride got the better of me and I vomited violently and repeatedly. This set off a chain reaction of burning acid reflux and the regurgitation of feeds that lasted for the next seven hours – a condition of bodily dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) that precludes a euphoric or spiritual engagement with the water. It is in such moments that the 'kernel of truth' in the mind-body split makes sense. Nevertheless, the focus on the unexpected pleasures of swimming offers an antidote to the reflexive resort to mind over matter explanations; it is never the action of one to the exclusion of the other, even if that's what it feels like. As Evers' male surfers, even the most 'out to conquer' swimmers when describing a swim talked about they *felt* rather than what they thought about (2009: 899). The suffering body is made 'actively absent' (Aalten, 2007), but like the Möbius strip, both mind and body are inseparable inflections of each other. To paraphrase Anne Fausto-Sterling's argument about attempts to delineate the relative contributions of nature and nurture, it is always 100% of both (Fausto-Sterling, 2004: 1510).

By focusing on the sensory pleasures of swimming, alternative and politically provocative ways of experiencing the sporting body emerge outside of the gendered rhetorics of mind over matter; as Young argues, it is not enough for a feminist politics of sport to aim for equality of participation, but rather, it is necessary to reconceptualise what sport and physical activity themselves are. This is not, then, to argue that everyone should take to the water. Instead, this paper shows not only the material and social persistence of gender in the engagement with swimming, but also the contingency, however constrained, of even the most entrenched ways of thinking about bodies, both within and outside sport.

ⁱ <http://www.dover.uk.com/channelswimming/stats.php> (accessed 27 April, 2012)

ⁱⁱ RES-000-22-4055. See: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/channelswimmer>

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